

Academic Incivility and the Graduate/Professional Student Experience:

Summary of Spring 2014 Survey of UMN-TC Graduate and Professional Students

Introduction

In spring 2014 the Student Conflict Resolution Center (SCRC) surveyed all UMN-TC graduate and professional students to assess the scope, manifestations, and effects of academic incivility on this population. Just over 1,600 students responded, about 10% of those surveyed. Table 1 compares the sample to the overall population and demonstrates that individuals responded at rates roughly proportional to their associated college size. Women, Caucasians, and U.S. citizens each responded at rates greater than expected based on the population size; groups that were each overrepresented in both of the previous iterations of the survey.

Academic harassment was defined as hostile, intimidating, or threatening behavior which interferes with the ability to work or study. Thirty percent, up significantly from 17% in 2011, reported being harassed by such behavior as hostile communication and threats to academic and employment status. Students reported being harassed by: other students (48%), non-adviser faculty (41%) and their graduate adviser (20%). Twenty percent reported the harassment. Sixty percent reported somewhat or complete dissatisfaction with how their complaint was handled. Of those who did not report, a majority feared retaliation, feared an impact on their future career, and did not believe anyone would help them. Forty-two percent of those who did report the harassment said that they had been retaliated against as a result of reporting.

Among students reporting academic harassment, 80% reported that the harassment somewhat or completely interfered with their ability to work or study. Forty percent, up from 36% in 2011, of those who experienced harassment reported they considered leaving the U as a result. About one-quarter reported observing another student being harassed; 28%, up from 18% in 2011, of students who observed another student being harassed considered leaving the U as a result of the harassment.

Table 1. Survey Response Rates

	Population	Sample
UMNTC Graduate/Professional Students	17,225	1,677
<i>By Gender</i>		
Female	8,366 (51.6%)	1,064 (63.4%)
Male	7,822 (48.2%)	612 (36.5%)
<i>By Citizenship Status</i>		
Not indicated / No value	447 (2.8%)	34 (2.0%)
Citizen	12262 (75.6%)	1,413 (84.3%)
Temporary Resident / International Student	2,985 (18.4%)	188 (11.2%)
Permanent Resident	528 (3.3%)	42 (2.5%)
<i>By Ethnicity</i>		
Not specified / No value	1,022 (6.3%)	102 (6.1%)
International	2,985 (18.4%)	188 (11.2%)
Black	429 (2.6%)	31 (1.8%)
American Indian	146 (0.9%)	28 (1.7%)
Asian and Pacific Islander	1,125 (6.9%)	93 (5.5%)
Hispanic	367 (2.3%)	47 (2.8%)
Caucasian	10,148 (62.6%)	1,188 (70.8%)
<i>Student Survey Response Totals by College Affiliation</i>		
Academic Health Center	93 (0.6%)	5 (0.3%)
Biological Sciences	112 (0.7%)	21 (1.3%)
Continuing Education	283 (1.7%)	22 (1.3%)
Dentistry	551 (3.4%)	50 (3.0%)
Design	277 (1.7%)	23 (1.4%)
Education and Human Development	2,267 (14.0%)	237 (14.1%)
Food, Ag. and Nat. Resource Sciences	627 (3.9%)	77 (4.6%)
Law	770 (4.7%)	94 (5.6%)
Liberal Arts	1,608 (9.9%)	233 (13.9%)
Management, Carlson	1,949 (12.0%)	112 (6.7%)
Medical School	2,144 (13.2%)	207 (12.3%)
Nursing	419 (2.6%)	48 (2.9%)
Pharmacy	532 (3.3%)	49 (2.9%)
Public Health	953 (5.9%)	86 (5.1%)
Public Affairs	376 (2.3%)	61 (3.6%)
Science and Engineering	2,416 (14.9%)	222 (13.2%)
Veterinary Medicine	476 (2.9%)	85 (5.1%)
Graduate School	369 (2.3%)	45 (2.7%)

Student Survey Response Totals by Academic Plan

Medicine MD	123
Law JD	93
Business Administration MBA	87
Veterinary Medicine DVM	76
Pharmacy Pharm D	44
Social Work MSW	42
Dentistry DDS	40
Chemistry PhD	35
Public Policy MPP	32
Nursing Practice, Doctor of	27
Educational Psychology PhD	23
Education, Curriculum & Instruction, PhD	22
Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development PhD	21
Miscellaneous	1,012

Harassment Experience Questions

Students were asked a series of 33 questions. The survey was split into sections of contingencies – either personally experiencing harassment as defined below or observing another student experiencing the behavior in question. If a student reported they had not been harassed (after being provided the definition), the student would proceed to being asked if they had observed another student being harassed.

Within the “personally experienced” and “observed” contingencies, there were two subdivisions: (1) students who reported the harassment and what their experience of reporting was, and (2) students who did not report the behavior and why they did not. Finally students were asked about the effects of the harassment personally and academically. Excerpts from the 680 comments made by respondents follow the quantitative report.

Have you (Q2) experienced harassment or (Q17) observed another graduate student being harassed while at the U of M?¹
(Harassment is behavior that is offensive, intimidating, or hostile which interferes with the ability to work or study)

	Personally Experienced	Observed
Yes	479 (30%)	374 (24%)
No	1,142 (70%)	1,185 (76%)

What were the manifestations of the harassing behavior?

Verbal hostility	292 (66%)	253 (70%)
Talking negatively about you	230 (52%)	154 (43%)
Hostile electronic communication	144 (33%)	131 (36%)
Denial of access to resources	137 (31%)	94 (26%)
Threats to academic status	110 (25%)	118 (33%)
Threats to employment status	53 (12%)	56 (16%)
Romantic/sexual advances	52 (12%)	58 (16%)
Unwanted or threatened physical contact	32 (7%)	26 (7%)
Other	68 (15%)	34 (9%)

By whom were you harassed/Who was exhibiting the harassing behavior that you observed?

Fellow Student/Resident	209 (48%)	186 (51%)
Faculty (non-advisor)	179 (41%)	177 (49%)
Graduate Advisor	87 (20%)	75 (21%)
Hospital/Residency Program Staff	44 (10%)	33 (9%)
Program Director	37 (8%)	31 (9%)
Administrator	24 (5%)	16 (4%)
Supervisor	20 (5%)	20 (6%)
Other	46 (11%)	22 (6%)

¹ More than 46% of respondents indicated that they had both experienced and observed academic harassment while at the U of M.

Did you report the harassing behavior?

Yes	89 (20%)	29 (8%)
No	351 (80%)	333 (92%)

Where did you report the harassing behavior?

Advisor	31 (36%)	8 (29%)
Student Conflict Resolution Center	28 (32%)	5 (18%)
Department Chair	27 (31%)	6 (21%)
Program Director	20 (23%)	3 (11%)
DGS	18 (21%)	5 (18%)
Supervisor	14 (16%)	2 (7%)
Office of Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action	7 (8%)	3 (11%)
Chief Resident	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
Other	31 (36%)	9 (32%)

How satisfied were you with the handling of your complaint?

Completely dissatisfied	34 (39%)	9 (32%)
Somewhat dissatisfied	18 (21%)	10 (36%)
No opinion	4 (5%)	2 (7%)
Somewhat satisfied	21 (24%)	5 (18%)
Completely satisfied	10 (11%)	2 (7%)

Were there things that could have been done to improve the reporting process and how your complaint was handled?

Yes	64 (74%)	18 (67%)
No	23 (26%)	9 (33%)

Did you experience retaliation after reporting your complaint?

Yes	36 (42%)	8 (30%)
No	50 (58%)	19 (70%)

What prevented you from reporting the harassment?

Fear of retaliation	194 (56%)	131 (40%)
Fear of impact on career	169 (49%)	93 (28%)
Did not believe anyone would help	161 (46%)	131 (40%)
Did not feel it was serious enough	143 (41%)	67 (20%)
Unsure of where to go	100 (29%)	76 (23%)
Shame/embarrassment	77 (22%)	11 (3%)
Not enough time	71 (20%)	38 (12%)
Believe individuals in authority already knew	68 (20%)	99 (30%)
Did not feel it was my place	[not asked]	182 (55%)
Other	62 (18%)	63 (19%)

Has the harassment kept you from performing to the best of your abilities?

No opinion	36 (8%)	85 (24%)
Did not interfere	46 (11%)	125 (36%)
Somewhat interfered	241 (56%)	109 (31%)
Completely interfered	104 (24%)	33 (9%)

Did the harassment you experienced lead you to do something different while at the U?

Avoided the person	271 (64%)	176 (53%)
Changed work/study routine to avoid harasser	116 (27%)	46 (14%)
Changed classes, schedule or rotations	62 (15%)	36 (11%)
Changed advisor	50 (12%)	12 (4%)
Changed program plan	49 (12%)	21 (6%)
Changed committee members or teams	35 (8%)	20 (6%)
Changed area of study, program, or specialty	32 (8%)	17 (5%)
Changed place of employment	16 (4%)	9 (3%)
Considered but not yet taken action	61 (14%)	48 (15%)
No	57 (13%)	66 (20%)
Other	66 (15%)	39 (12%)

Has the harassment caused you to consider leaving the U?

Yes	171 (40%)	97 (28%)
No	255 (60%)	255 (72%)

Has the harassment you experienced affected you in any of the following ways?

Anxiety	326 (80%)	149 (62%)
Excessive thoughts about the harassment	270 (66%)	105 (44%)
Feeling edgy/irritable	268 (65%)	114 (48%)
Loss of concentration	250 (61%)	87 (36%)
Feeling depressed	223 (54%)	75 (31%)
Disrupted sleep	217 (53%)	64 (27%)
Delayed academic progress	153 (37%)	48 (20%)
Feeling unsafe	107 (26%)	63 (26%)
Other	59 (14%)	35 (15%)

Qualitative Analysis

The last question on the survey, “Please feel free to write any comments you would like to make regarding this topic” elicited 324 comments. The responses were divided into four categories:

- 1 – those which expressed a serious concern and reflected a negative experience, 29%
- 2 – those which reflected a somewhat negative experience, 31%
- 3 – those which made suggestions to remedy a problem, provide constructive criticism, 23%
- 4 – those which expressed a positive experience, 17%

Comments have been left as written, though all identifying information has been redacted to protect confidentiality; some comments have been edited as indicated by “...”.

Examples – Category 1:

“Tenured faculty who have been at the UMN for a long time think they can get away with anything, and they do.”

“It is my sincere hope that the University begins to take harassment seriously. Please see the University of Colorado's philosophy department for some strategies to start addressing the widespread and very dangerous harassment that occurs at the U of M. It affects everyone. In the case of my department, women graduate students (and junior faculty) were harassed to such an extent that we all changed our routines, coursework, participation in the department, and so on. We felt scared for four years.”

“This faculty member has had many graduate students, post-docs and technicians leave their lab because of the harassment.”

“The top 3 research institution goal has turned the university into a business that values equity and diversity only if it looks politically favorable or makes money.”

“I came to the UMN to get an advanced degree, be trained for scholarly research, and gain valuable knowledge. Over the past year, I've lost all desire for research because of the continual harassment and hostile environment I've experienced. I never thought I would give up on research but I guess anything's possible. I've given up.”

“The harassment I experience lasted almost 2 years before something was done about it. This student caused such a hostile situation within our department that there had to be a department-wide meeting about academic civility.”

“Felt belittled and humiliated by the professors and academic advisor in my program - that I had to justify my disability when I had documentation and a letter from Disability Services.”

“A new faculty member showed up and perhaps wanted to get more personally familiar with students. Unfortunately, this prof had a bit too much to drink and was basically flirting with students. Later I learned it went WAAAY too far with at least one current student.”

Examples – Category 2

“As a result of the harassment, I recommend potential students avoid my program.”

“While overall I have enjoyed many aspects of my time at the U of M, and will leave with the degree I intended to earn, I have already discouraged, and will continue to discourage people I meet from applying to this university to obtain a degree in my field.”

“It is 2014 and I still feel I am “the other.”

“There is a pervasive and harmful environment of overwork, stress, and pressure on graduate students in my department. I can't say it rises to the level of harassment, but I think it's an unhealthy atmosphere.”

“Misogynistic comments from a particular family member, and persistent misogynistic undertones from a surprisingly large number of male students.”

“It has made my experience at U of M quite miserable.”

“Several students in our study group considered quitting the program due to the behavior of one student, and the inaction when we reported it. The University needs to take a more proactive approach to student complaints.”

“The classroom is no place for professors to be making sexual and sexist jokes.”

Examples – Category 3

“I appreciate this survey and hope to see improvement, our graduate career is endemically sick with horrible and unprofessional behaviors that do not help young professionals to succeed or even want to continue. This year in particular my department has lost/ will lose 4 graduate students who left due to mistreatment by professors and fellow students and the department avoids calling it as such. That has had a great impact on students who are still in our department.”

“I think that being at the University as a minority, we have little information as to who we can safely turn to if we need support, especially when dealing [with] faculty who have exhibited racially-inappropriate behavior/harassment towards us as students.”

“There is a lot of subtle sexist behavior that becomes part of the culture of departments that are overly male-dominated. Female students in those departments are often looked down upon, judged more harshly, objectified in sexual ways or deemed less serious. This can generally be solved by increasing diversity among faculty in departments- more women, more racial diversity and less old sexist white powerful men.”

“I think you should also ask about microaggressions... These relatively minor events accumulate over time, creating a hostile environment within the university. If you just ask about these "major" events, you are missing a big part of the picture.”

“The institution creates and exploits an environment of harassment that flows from the top down. Without large scale, systematic change this harassment will continue and intensify through an ongoing logic of privatization and corporate-style restructuring.”

“There needs to be some sort of people management class for professors... These skills often get overlooked as "soft" skills that can be learned on the job and are "nice" but not necessary, but the truth is that those skills are the most difficult to learn. Without mastery of these skills, the productivity of a lab can be severely impeded.”

“It's very important to gather data on this topic and to make it public that such behavior is distracting and harmful to students of any age. I also think that bullying in graduate school occurs in subtle ways, it maybe through demeaning comments/put downs, making fun of someone (it may seem jokingly but is not), and other rude and uncomfortable behavior.”

“This is a serious issue. Hopefully this survey will result in concrete actions being taken that will end these bullying behaviors. Do as I say not as I do, must be abolished- we are all responsible for professional behavior, especially faculty and staff. Students must be respected.”

Examples – Category 4

“I think it's great that you are conducting this survey. Thank you.”

“Thank you for doing this survey. It made me feel like someone actually cares about the abuse that some graduate students are encountering here and would like to make changes.”

“I'm glad that there is a group looking into this! Though I am too new to have probably witnessed anything, I'm sure that it is an issue affecting students on any campus.”

“[Thank you.] Although I have not experienced harassment personally, I think this is a great initiative from the U.”

“I'm fine. Thanks for asking though!”

“I will get in touch if I see any harassing behaviour.”

“I have never observed anything but respectful professional behavior during my tenure at the U of M.”

“I'm good, but appreciate your concern in the issue. Remain vigilant.”

Survey Support

The Student Conflict Resolution Center thanks the Office of Measurement Services (and Shelly Wymer) for ongoing support in the administration and interpretation of the survey.